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ABSTRACT

The PASSAGEWAY Project (Program To Assist Secondary Students in Achieving Gainful Employment for West Alabama Youth) sought to increase the academic, social, and job skills of high-risk and dropout special education students. A cooperative program of the University of West Alabama, public schools, businesses, and social service agencies, the project used the resources of the university's College of Education and Division of Technology to develop an alternative program that accomplished several objectives. The program identified and recruited youth with disabilities who were at high risk of dropping out or who had recently dropped out in six west Alabama counties; provided functional literacy training to identified youth; developed and implemented employment training for youth aged 16 and above; provided individual youth and their families with counseling focused on specific outcomes; increased student participation through alternative scheduling and distance learning; and developed business partnerships culminating in employment opportunities for students with disabilities. This paper also discusses the criteria for student identification, program staff and their professional qualifications, the role of school personnel and industry liaisons, availability of various resources to the program, program activities, and 3-year outcomes. (SV)

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PASSAGEWAY: AN AVENUE INTO THE FUTURE

The emphasis on transitional services has grown significantly in recent years. Successful transition to postsecondary settings is measured by the adult outcomes of continuing education, independent living, and employment (Evers, 1996). According to DeStefano and Wermuth (1992), barriers to successful transition exist that call for careful planning in student Individual Education Plans (IEP) in order to access and succeed in postsecondary programs. Secondary coursework, related activities, work experiences, responsibilities at home, and community participation must be coordinated in order to maximize a student's readiness for postsecondary settings (Evers, 1996).

Unsuccessful transition results in a lack of vocational opportunities available to individuals with disabilities. According to Rusch and Phelps (1987), these individuals with disabilities, are likely to be unemployed, underemployed or only employed part-time. Dowdy, Carter, and Smith (1990) further suggested that students with disabilities have employment status that is limited and their opportunities for independence are seriously curtailed. These deficits all point to the need for comprehensive programming as well as careful planning for transitional programs regarding students with disabilities.

The PASSAGEWAY (Program to Assist Secondary Students in Achieving Gainful Employment for West Alabama Youth) Project was designed to help those students who are at-risk of dropping out of school, students who have not obtained their diploma because of deficiencies in their high school exit exam, or because they dropped out of school and never completed the requirements. The students served came from six rural counties of West Central Alabama. These counties include Choctaw, Greene, Hale, Marengo, Pickens, and Sumter. This project, jointly funded by the U.S. Department of Education and The University of West Alabama, sought to increase the academic, social, and job skills of at risk and dropout special education students. PASSAGEWAY was used as a means of preparing students for opportunities that will be present in their areas in the near future.

The PASSAGEWAY Program established a cooperation between The University of West Alabama, public schools, local businesses and industries, and public and private social service agencies. The PASSAGEWAY Project brought together the resources of the College of Education and the Division of Technology at The University of West Alabama to develop an alternative program that accomplished several objectives. First, the program identified and recruited youth with disabilities who were at risk for dropping out of school or who had already dropped out of school. The school systems in the six counties and the special education teachers within selected schools completed this objective. Information was gathered that included age, gender, race, type of disability, and class standing. Second, it provided the

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identified youth with functional literacy training. The program employed qualified staff members, which included a reading specialist. Third, the program developed and implemented transitional plans that provided employment training for students ages 16 and above. The staff members developed transition plans that were the most advantageous for each student. The staff also offered a variety of educational experiences to ensure that reasonable alternatives were presented to the participants. The program used activities such as lectures, in-class assignments, and role-playing. Fourth, PASSAGEWAY also offered the identified students and their families with counseling that focused on specific outcomes for the students. Counseling was also directed toward training staff to work effectively with the participants. Next, the program established incentives to ensure student participation by offering alternative scheduling and class formats utilizing distance learning technologies. Each student had the opportunity to become involved with immerging technology through the use of computers. Finally, it developed relationships with the Industrial Board of West Alabama at the advisory level that created a partnership culminating in employment opportunities for students with disabilities. Members of the Industrial board were surveyed to provide feedback on the skills and traits that they felt were most significant when evaluating potential employees.

The PASSAGEWAY project focused on the problems of at-risk special education students and special education students that have dropped out within the four years prior to entering the program. The uniqueness of the project is manifested in the cooperation between The University of West Alabama, public schools, business and industry, and social services agencies. Each entity maintained its unique function while learning to share personnel, resources, and materials with the others. Therefore, a highly organized effort was made in the project to utilize each agency both in individual services and cooperative services. The project focused on the obstacles to successful transition that existed in the six county rural areas. These obstacles included lack of employment opportunities, lack of educational opportunities, deficiency in job skills, and limited mobility. Additionally, the project also attempted to alleviate the common rural problem of distance between facilities.

The PASSAGEWAY Project was created to serve students who were potential dropouts or who had already dropped out of school. Two strands of students were identified to participate in this program. The first strand was incoming 9th, 10th, and 11th graders who were currently in school, but deemed at risk for dropping out of school based on information such as frequency of absenteeism, grades below "C" at report periods, the number of disciplinary infractions and the professional judgement of their respective teachers. Strand Two students were those with disabilities who had dropped out of school four years prior to the entering of the program. These students were referred by virtue of school records, teacher referrals, and by various community agencies, such as the Department of Human Resources, Juvenile Court, and local mental health centers. Both Strand One and Strand Two students could also enter the program by way of their own request.

The PASSAGEWAY Project required a team of professionals possessing experience in education, experience working with students with special needs and their families, staff development, collaboration skills, curriculum development, and systems advocacy. The project required staff members that possessed the above skills. Two resident assistants worked in the dormitory at The University of West Alabama. These assistants were responsible for supervising the participants in the dormitory. The assistants' major function was to ensure student adherence to the dorm rules. Additionally, the assistants were involved with crisis intervention and problem-solving. Two activity coordinators were involved in the PASSAGEWAY Project. These people were responsible for the development and coordination of activities involving all the participants. Other staff members included four graduate assistants, who were assigned to coordinate all program activities, to intervene in major crises, and to provide instruction in career exploration and social skills. Four additional instructors were employed for General Education Development (GED) training and technology exploration. Also included in the program was a transition coordinator and a counselor available on an as needed basis. The transition coordinator served as a

liaison between the program participants and industry leaders and the respective public school systems that the participants attended. The counselor served on an as needed basis to assist in crisis intervention and problem solving.

Other than the key personnel responsible for the program and its functioning, there was a number of school and industry related personnel. The school personnel included superintendents of education, special education coordinators and teachers, general education teachers, guidance counselors, and area vocational training campus directors. These important school officials assisted in the referral of prospective program participants and they provided the necessary data that identified these students as being at risk of dropping out of school. They also performed the invaluable service of locating those students who had already dropped out of school. The aforementioned industrial liaisons primarily consisted of personnel directors of key industries in the area. The industrial liaisons were viewed as being instrumental in arranging tours of industrial sites and other potential areas of employment for the PASSAGEWAY Project students. The industrial personnel offered instruction and advice to the students in job interview and retention skills.

Other important components of the program included the availability of a variety of resources. These included the Learning Resources Center (Library), Student Services (Counseling Center), Student Support Services (a federally qualified program offering assistance to qualified degree-seeking students), the Department of Journalism (which contained state of the art equipment making possible distance learning), technical laboratories, and classroom space.

The talented and varied staff as well as the ancillary consultants composed a unique team to implement the objectives of the PASSAGEWAY Project. This group of professionals and student assistants proved adept a linking service in special education, rehabilitation, adult education, vocational education, and postsecondary education. A highlight of their efforts was that in addition to the linkage of professional educational services, they were able to form partnerships with community-based organizations as well as industry and business. The efforts of the personnel involved resulted in an integration of transitional services that were driven by the ideals of independent living, self-determination, and successful employment for the program participants.

The PASSAGEWAY Project focused on building academic, social, and job skills. The academic skills were guided by GED preparation for those who had dropped out of school and study skills for those who are presently in school. The social skills were enhanced through group and individual counseling sessions and through activities that enabled the students to interact with peers, professionals, and others. The job skills highlighted job safety, seeking and maintaining employment, and the necessity of keeping abreast of changes within a job.

The program made efficient use of traditional classroom activities. These activities included lectures, and in-class assignments. Basic math and reading skills along with social skills training, career planning, and placement were the primary focus of these activities. Strand One students received these services daily on campus at The University of West Alabama for approximately one week. Strand Two students who were involved for six weeks. Students received services on The University of West Alabama's campus geared toward job seeking activities and skills. These skills included learning to appropriately fill out job applications, interview techniques, and job retention skills. Strand Two students were also offered GED classes at The University of West Alabama and alternative sites in the area. The students were also offered small, innovative classes that operated in non-traditional ways. The students were provided with a job coach to begin preparation for employment. PASSAGEWAY Project made use of consultation services for its Strand Two participants by having arranged for personnel directors of various businesses and industries to address them concerning job procurement skills, and work habits

leading to job retention. These students were also provided with reading material and videos to augment this phase of their educational process.

During the second and third years of the program, any Strand Two students who had received a GED certificate was offered the opportunity to attend The University of West Alabama. Each of these students was offered a stipend of $1,500.00 per quarter for his/her education. In classes at The University of West Alabama for Strand One students, the program provided a computer lab that contained on-line services for twenty personal computers equipped with printers.

Research has shown that at risk students, like regular students, are motivated by diverse methodology and experiences. The project utilized one-on-one and small group learning activities. Each participant was treated as a unique individual and his/her program was modified to meet his/her specific needs.

During the three year program, services were provided for more than one hundred students. There were no Strand One, at-risk 9th, 10th, and 11th graders, students reported to have dropped out of school. More than half of the Strand Two, having already dropped out, students reported having employment.

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